

How could psychology help in understanding criminal behaviour – does society create criminals?

Criminal behaviour is a complex concept, the discussion of which utilises a variety of academic disciplines. Understanding criminal behaviour is complicated as it is a socially constructed idea, meaning it cannot be defined in simple terms. The legal definition requires that an action is carried out that breaks the law, but this raises issues regarding whether an individual has carried out an act with the intent of causing harm (which can be complicated by factors such as whether the person is deemed psychologically fit to be held accountable for their actions). There are also issues raised regarding morality and its relations to the legal definition of criminal behaviour, as an act can be illegal but deemed to not break any moral codes by some members of society (Hollin, 1992). Although attempting to explain criminal activity through research of one factor that influences behaviour fails to account for the complexities of the human mind, applying psychology can help in understanding criminal behaviour and assist in attempting to answer the difficult question of whether criminals are born with the capacity to commit crime or are instead the products of society's influences over them.

Many psychologists have presented theories and evidence which can be used to suggest that society does create criminals. An example is social learning theory, which is a widely known psychological theory developed by Bandura in 1977 (Bandura and Walters, 1977) based on a study he carried out in which he observed imitation of aggressive models within a group of pre-school children (Bandura et al., 1961). When put in its simplest terms, social learning theory is the idea that all of a person's behaviour is acquired from learning and the influence of others. The concepts of modelling and imitation are particularly important components: individuals mimic behaviour that they have observed another person carrying out. This is especially true when the individual feels represented by the model, which is known as identification, or sees the model be rewarded for their behaviour, known as vicarious reinforcement. Social learning theory can be

applied to explain criminal behaviour, suggesting that people turn to crime as a result of this behaviour being modelled by someone else, which could be someone the individual knows personally, such as a parent, or an example within the media. This idea has been developed further by Akers, who argued that the probability of an individual engaging in criminal behaviour is increased significantly if they have been exposed to models who also commit criminal acts (Akers, 1998). He suggested this was particularly true when the individual identifies with the model and expects their behaviour to produce positive consequences, providing support for the concepts of identification and vicarious reinforcement. The work of both Bandura and Akers supports the argument that society creates criminals, as the application of social learning theory to criminal behaviour suggests that people become criminals only when exposed to models who also commit criminal behaviour, implying that if people were raised in an environment where they were not exposed to people who engage in crime (or if they saw the criminal model punished for their actions) they would not go on to engage in criminal acts themselves.

Aker's interpretation of social learning theory is based on the ideas of Sutherland's differential association theory (Akers and Jennings, 2015), which is another idea that implies society creates criminals. Sutherland believed that whether a person engaged in criminal behaviour was based on their socialisation and whether this makes their definition of crime favourable or not (Matsueda, 2000). Those who were socialised into accepting the law would not become criminals, whereas those raised in criminal subcultures would go on to engage in crime themselves as they view it as something acceptable. For example, individuals in higher social classes may see tax fraud as something that is the norm, so engage in such behaviour due to its normalisation within their culture. Individuals raised in environments where crime is accepted are also more likely to possess the required skills to commit criminal acts and will likely have access to opportunities to engage in crime, due to being exposed to such an environment from a young age. Therefore,

Sutherland believed that criminals are created by society as whether or not someone commits crime is based on their interpretation of the consequences, which is dictated by their upbringing.

Another psychologist whose work has contributed to the understanding of criminal behaviour is Bowlby. Bowlby's research and ideas are significant within the area of developmental psychology, with his theory of attachment being arguably one of the most well known theories within the topic. A study that is of particular importance to the discussion of crime is his research of 44 thieves, in which he examined the childhood experiences of 44 children who had been convicted of stealing (Bowlby, 1944). He then compared the relationship with their mother to the results of intellectual and emotional tests, in order to establish a relationship between experiencing prolonged separation from, or a poor relationship with, their mother and engaging in criminal behaviour. Of the 44 thieves, 14 were found to be what Bowlby referred to as 'affectionless characters' (meaning they were incapable of experiencing empathy or remorse) and 12 of these had experienced prolonged separation from their mother in childhood, suggesting a link between the two. He used this study to develop his theory of maternal deprivation, the idea that if an individual experiences a lack of attachment with their mother during the 'critical period' for attachment in childhood they will go on to experience emotional problems (Bowlby, 1951), which would then influence whether or not they are involved in crime. Bowlby's research therefore suggests that society creates criminals, as he implies that it is the lack of a meaningful attachment in childhood which causes people to experience emotional maladjustment and an increased likelihood of being involved in crime.

The work of these psychologists arguably demonstrates that society does have an impact on whether or not people commit crime. However, others argue that criminal behaviour is caused by other factors. Evidence suggests that genetic factors can have an influence over whether people

engage in crime or not. For example, men are more likely to commit crime than woman, which is true across all countries (Herrnstein and Wilson, 1985). It is possible to argue that the difference in rates of criminal behaviour based on sex is due to societal factors, as differences in socialisation influence individuals to behave differently based on their gender, with men being more likely to commit crime as a result of being socialised into a role that expects them to be more aggressive and assertive than women. Other psychologists argue that due to the universality of the differences in crime rates based on sex there are biological factors that influence criminal behaviour, as even in countries where socialisation differs from western norms these differences in crime rates between sexes still exist (Herrnstein and Wilson, 1985). Maccoby and Jacklin (1978) support this, arguing that involvement in crime is largely based on the level of aggression a person shows, with their research suggesting that biological influences, such as differences in hormone levels, cause men to be more aggressive than women, which is what causes them to have an increased likelihood of being involved in crime. The work of these psychologists therefore suggests that society does not create criminals, as biological differences exist between sexes which influence whether people will engage in criminal behaviour, with it being a universal fact that men are more likely than women to commit crime.

Other psychologists also support the claim that factors beyond society's control dictate the likelihood of a person engaging in criminal behaviour. Siegel and McCormick (2006) consider a number of these factors within their book, *Criminology in Canada*. One factor they discuss is neurological differences which can influence whether or not an individual engages in crime, an example being attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). This increases the likelihood of an individual engaging in criminal behaviour, which could be due to the fact it causes higher levels of impulsivity or alternatively the result of an increased likelihood of school failure, as there is evidence linking poor reading skills to attention problems (Maguin et al., 1993). They also summarise evidence of twin studies, which suggest that criminal behaviour does have a

genetic basis. Christiansen et al. (1977) studied twins and found that monozygotic twins (who share 100% of their DNA) had a 52% similarity regarding anti-social behaviour, as opposed to dizygotic where the similarity was 27%. The work of Siegel and McCormick (and the psychologists they based their ideas on) therefore demonstrates that society does not create criminals as they argue that whether someone engages in crime is dictated by neurological factors and genetics rather than societal influences.

In conclusion, it is incredibly difficult to establish a monocausal explanation of criminal behaviour, however examining the perspectives of different psychologists can demonstrate that society does have a large impact on the development of deviancy within people. Furthermore, researching into this topic demonstrates that psychology can be incredibly useful in understanding criminal behaviour as it can be used to explain both sides of the argument of whether criminals are born with the capacity to commit crime or created by society. People may be born with innate predispositions that make them more likely to commit crimes, but arguably the likelihood of a person committing criminal behaviour is largely determined by society's influences over them. Overall, psychology has a large impact in helping to in understanding criminal behaviour and can be used to argue that society does create criminals.

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